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# Who Goes to Newcomer Schools? Las Americas Middle School

Brian Holzman, Camila Cigarroa Kennedy, Tori Thomas, Aimee Chin,  
Stephanie Potochnick and Kalena Cortes

**Research Brief**

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**Note on the authors.** Brian Holzman, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at Texas A&M University. Camila Cigarroa Kennedy is a researcher at Education Northwest. Aimee Chin, Ph.D., is a professor at the University of Houston. Stephanie Potochnick, Ph.D., is an associate professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Kalena Cortes, Ph.D., is a professor at Texas A&M University.

**About HERC.** Focusing on the most pressing challenges facing the region, the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC research is developed directly alongside district leaders with findings shared with decision-makers — culminating in long-term, equity-minded solutions, opportunities and growth for Houston and beyond.

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## Research Brief

# Who Goes to Newcomer Schools? Las Americas Middle School

Newcomer programs aim to serve newly arrived immigrant students by providing specialized instruction and nonacademic support beyond what is offered in traditional English learner classrooms. In Houston ISD, Las Americas is a standalone program that serves newcomer students in grades 4-8. Given the growth of newly arrived immigrant students in the district, it is important to understand what characteristics predict whether students and families choose to enroll in a newcomer program. An analysis of 12 years of administrative data showed that economically disadvantaged students, students from sub-Saharan Africa and Central America, students with lower levels of oral English proficiency, and students who lived close to the school were most likely to enroll at Las Americas. Additionally, results suggest that the school's outreach and recruitment strategies were associated with enrollment. Finally, the implementation of the school's grade level expansion and school busing policy both had positive impacts on enrollment.

## Key Findings

### What were the characteristics of students who enrolled at Las Americas?

1. Newcomer students who were **economically disadvantaged** were more likely to enroll at Las Americas than non-economically disadvantaged students.
2. Newcomer students from **sub-Saharan Africa and Central America** were most likely to enroll at Las Americas.
3. Newcomer students who had **lower levels of oral English proficiency** were more likely to enroll at Las Americas than students with higher levels of oral English proficiency.
4. Newcomer students who **lived closer to Las Americas** were more likely to enroll at the school than students who lived farther away.

### How were different outreach and recruitment strategies associated with Las Americas enrollment?

5. Newcomer students **who lived closer to the school and who lived in neighborhoods with more immigrants** were most likely to enroll.

### How did the grade level expansion and the school busing policy impact Las Americas enrollment?

6. The **grade level expansion** and the **school busing policy** both increased Las Americas enrollment.

# Background

## Who are newcomer students?

Newcomer students are immigrant, English learner (EL) students within their first few years of schooling in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Compared to their U.S.-born EL peers, newcomers may need extra or specialized support in addition to what is offered in traditional English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms (Custodio, 2011; Short & Boyson, 2004). Many newcomer students come to the U.S. as refugees or asylees and are classified as students with interrupted formal education (SIFE), which is when a student experienced a gap in schooling back in their home country (e.g., a 12-year-old who only attended third grade) (Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2020; Short & Boyson, 2004). Newcomer students and their families may suffer from trauma stemming from experiences prior to or during their journey to the country (Hos, 2020; Jaycox et al., 2002). Because of these factors, navigating the U.S. educational system can be challenging and potentially hinder recent immigrant students’ academic success (Potochnick, 2018).

## What are newcomer programs?

Newcomer programs aim to ease newcomer students’ transition into the U.S. schooling system by addressing their academic and nonacademic needs. These programs promote accelerated English language acquisition, develop students’ native language literacy, provide content-based instruction, and facilitate cultural adjustment (Short & Boyson, 2012). Unlike traditional ESL education, newcomer programs adopt pedagogical techniques like sheltered instruction, which allow

students to learn grade-appropriate content while they gain proficiency in English (Short & Boyson, 2012). Through these strategies, newcomer programs enable students to transition smoothly into mainstream classes. Newcomer programs are comprehensive in scope by offering social and psychological support to students, involving families, and connecting people to community resources (Short & Boyson, 2012). An important feature of newcomer programs is that they can accommodate students entering school midterm or midyear, since immigration is rarely timed with the start of a school year (Short & Boyson, 2012).

## Newcomer students and programs in HISD

In 2018–2019, the most recent school year examined in this study, 12% of HISD students were born outside the U.S. Between the 2011–2012 and 2018–2019 school years, the number of newcomer middle school students in the district more than doubled. Given these trends, HISD operates two schools serving this population of recent immigrant, English learners: Las Americas Middle School<sup>1</sup> for students in grades 4–8 who have been in the U.S. for less than 1 year, and Liberty High School for high school-aged and older, nontraditional students.

## Las Americas Middle School

In 1995, Las Americas Middle School opened in Southwest Houston, an area of the city with a high concentration of foreign-born residents. As a separate-site

<sup>1</sup> During the study period, the school was named Las Americas Middle School. Since then, the school was renamed as Las Americas Newcomer School.



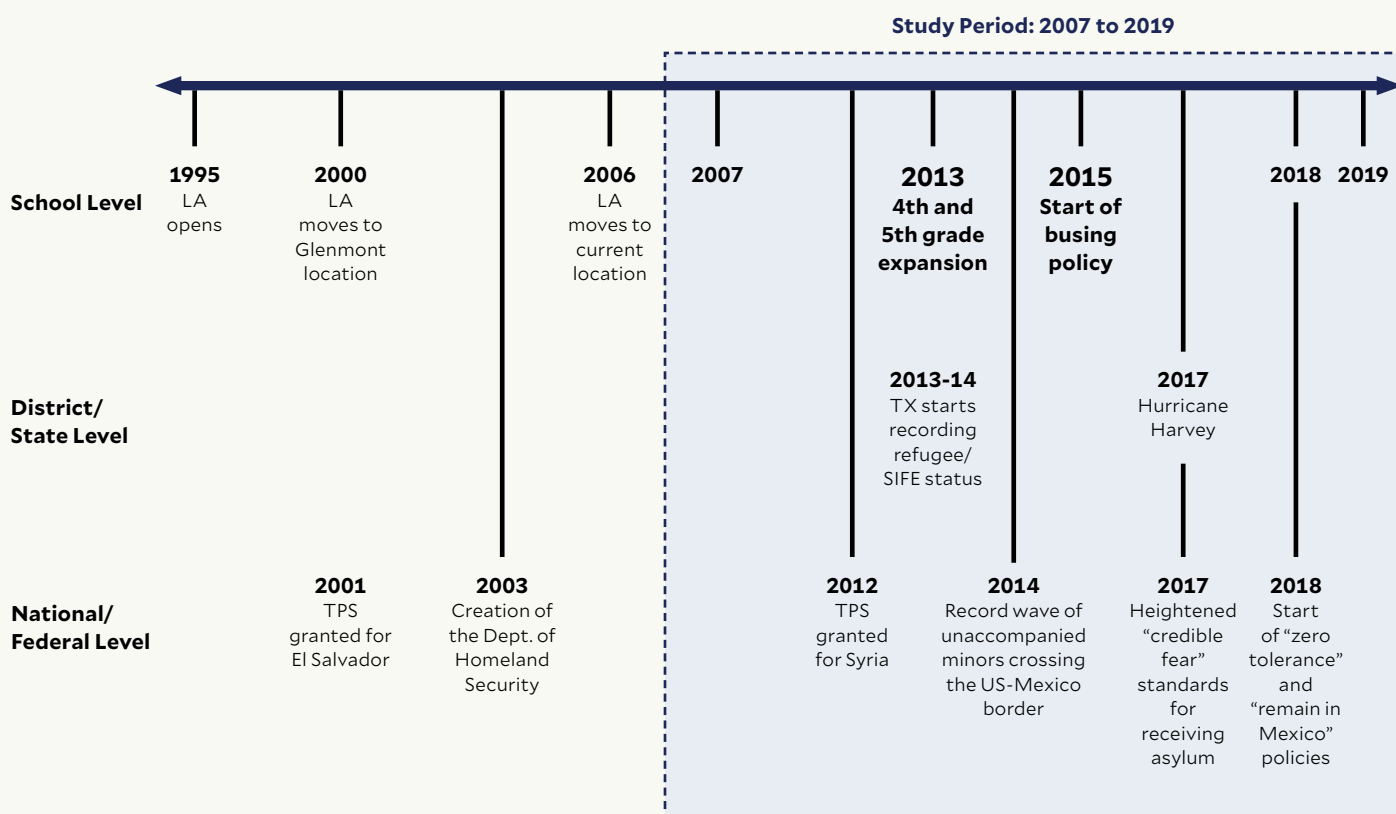
newcomer program, Las Americas serves newcomer students and offers a content-based EL curriculum aimed to accelerate students' language acquisition and prepare them to transition to mainstream educational programs. Recognizing the struggles of students' lived experiences, the school provides social and psychological support through a trauma-informed curriculum and through community partnerships with social workers and mental health specialists. In fall 2006, Las Americas moved from its original location in an apartment complex in the Gulfton neighborhood to the campus of Jane Long Academy, where it continues to operate as a separate school. While the school initially served students in grades 6 through 8, it expanded to serve students in grades 4 and 5 starting in the 2012–2013 school year.

Las Americas is a school of choice, which means that no students are zoned to it; students and their families must opt to enroll at the school. The school has adopted outreach and recruitment strategies to ensure educational equity—to serve students with the greatest academic, social, and psychological needs. School lead-

ers reach out to families who live nearby, especially in neighborhoods with high numbers of recent immigrant residents. The school collaborates with local refugee resettlement agencies to inform families about the school and organizes efforts to canvas apartment complexes where immigrants are known to live. Aside from recruitment, the principal during the period of study prioritized admitting students with the lowest levels of English language proficiency (e.g., students who had a third-grade literacy level or below).

Since its founding, Las Americas implemented two policies to expand its reach. One was the grade level expansion in 2012–2013, which allowed fourth- and fifth-grade students to enroll at the school. The second policy change was the provision of school bus transportation beginning in fall 2015. Prior to that, students had to provide their own transportation to attend the school. The timeline in Figure 1 notes these policy changes, as well as other events at local, state, and national levels.

**FIGURE 1** Timeline of Key Events at the School, District/State, and National/Federal Levels



Note: Temporary Protected Status (TPS) provides temporary immigration status to individuals from specific countries in the event of natural disasters, military conflict or war, and other extenuating circumstances.



## Research Questions

To address the unique needs of newcomer immigrant students, districts have established newcomer programs and schools. Using HISD administrative data, this study asks the following research questions:

1. What were the characteristics of students who enrolled at Las Americas?
2. How were different outreach and recruitment strategies associated with Las Americas enrollment?
3. How did the grade level expansion and the school busing policy impact Las Americas enrollment?

To address these questions, the research team examined 12 cohorts of HISD newcomer students from the 2007-2008 to 2018-2019 school years. Newcomer students were defined as foreign-born, EL students in their first year in the U.S. The outcome variable in all analysis measured whether a student enrolled at Las Americas upon arrival.

For research question 1, the sample included newcomer students eligible to enroll at Las Americas, specifically newcomers in grades 6-8 through the 2011-2012 school year and newcomers in grades 4-8 thereafter (N = 10,477). Research question 2 and the school busing analysis of research question 3 were limited to students who had low test scores on the oral English proficiency exam and who lived within a 20-minute drive from the school (N = 5,350). The grade level expansion analysis of research question 3 was also limited to low-performing, nearby students but had a sample size of 5,820 due to the requirements of the statistical method used. Details on the data, sample, and analytic strategies are available from the authors upon request.

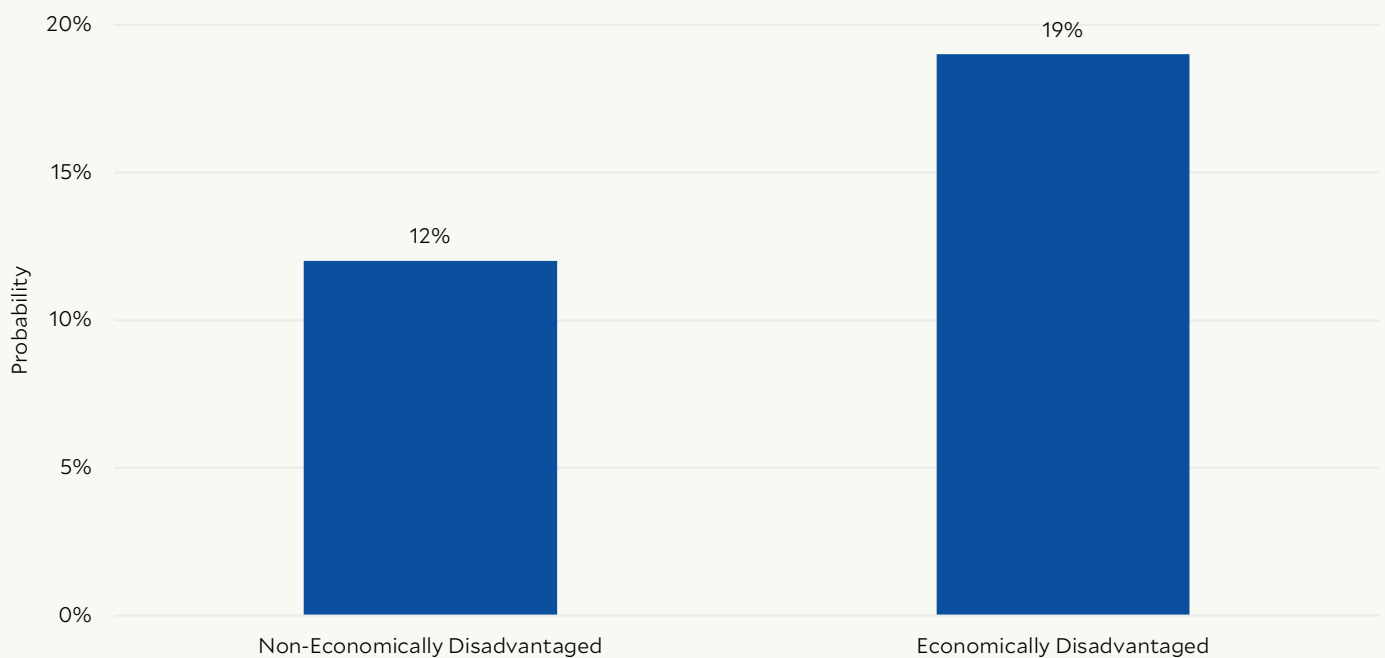
# Key Findings

## 1 Newcomer students who were economically disadvantaged were more likely to enroll at Las Americas than non-economically disadvantaged students.

Economically disadvantaged newcomer students were more likely to enroll at Las Americas instead of other schools in HISD than non-economically disadvantaged newcomer students. Figure 2 illustrates the probability of Las Americas enrollment by economic disadvantage. Accounting for background character-

istics, 19% of students who were economically disadvantaged enrolled at Las Americas versus other HISD schools, while only 12% of non-economically disadvantaged students enrolled at Las Americas versus other HISD schools.

**FIGURE 2** Probability of Las Americas Enrollment by Economic Disadvantage

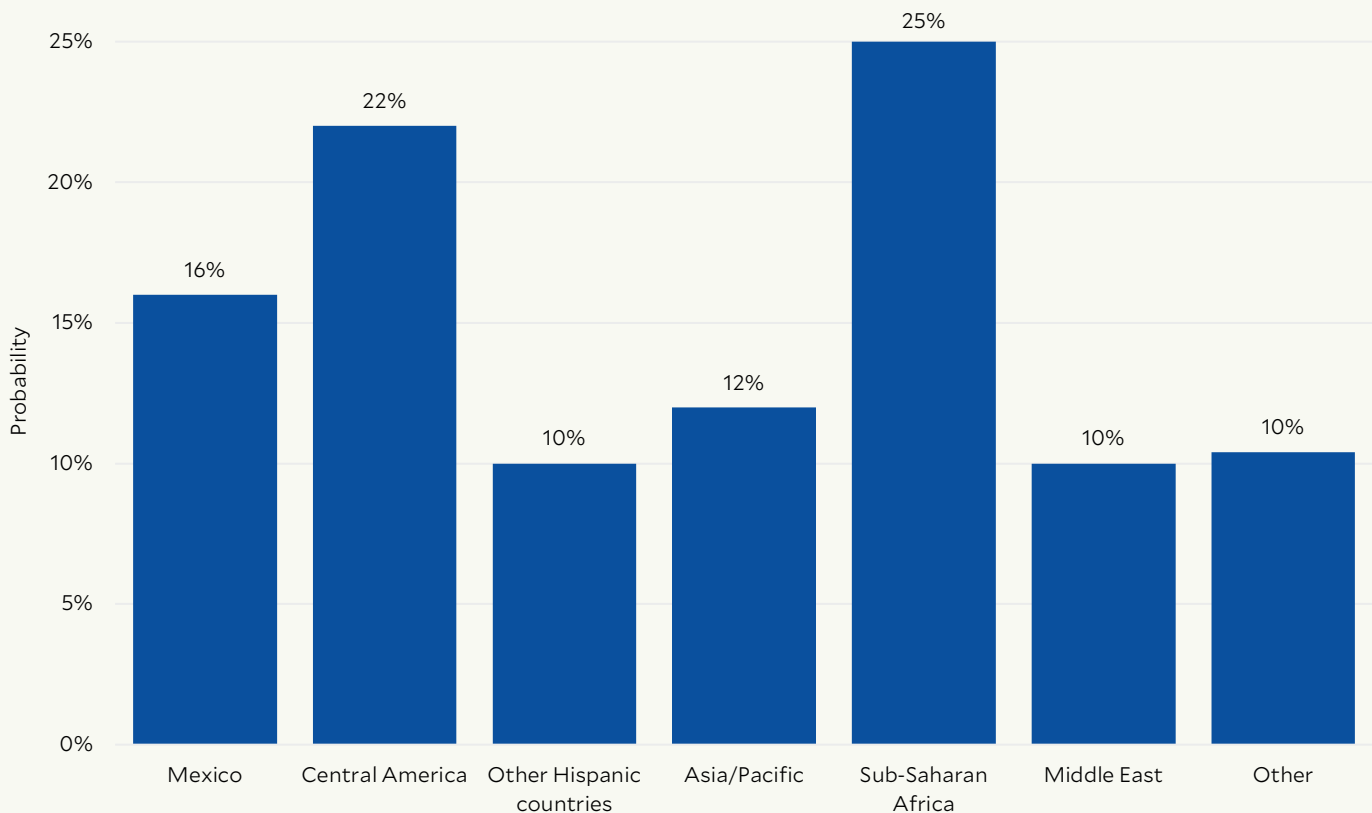


## 2 Newcomer students from sub-Saharan Africa and Central America were most likely to enroll at Las Americas.

Newcomer students' likelihood of enrolling at Las Americas varied by their country of origin. Figure 3 illustrates that after accounting for background characteristics, 25% of students from sub-Saharan Africa and 22% of students from Central America enrolled at Las Americas instead of choosing other HISD schools. Sixteen percent of Mexican-origin students enrolled at Las Americas versus other HISD schools, while 12% of students from Asia and the Pacific enrolled at Las Americas versus other HISD schools. Ten percent of students from other Hispanic countries (not including Mexico or Central American countries), the Middle East, and other countries enrolled at Las Americas instead of enrolling at other schools in HISD.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Other countries include unspecified countries or countries represented by too few students.

**FIGURE 3** Probability of Las Americas Enrollment by Country of Origin





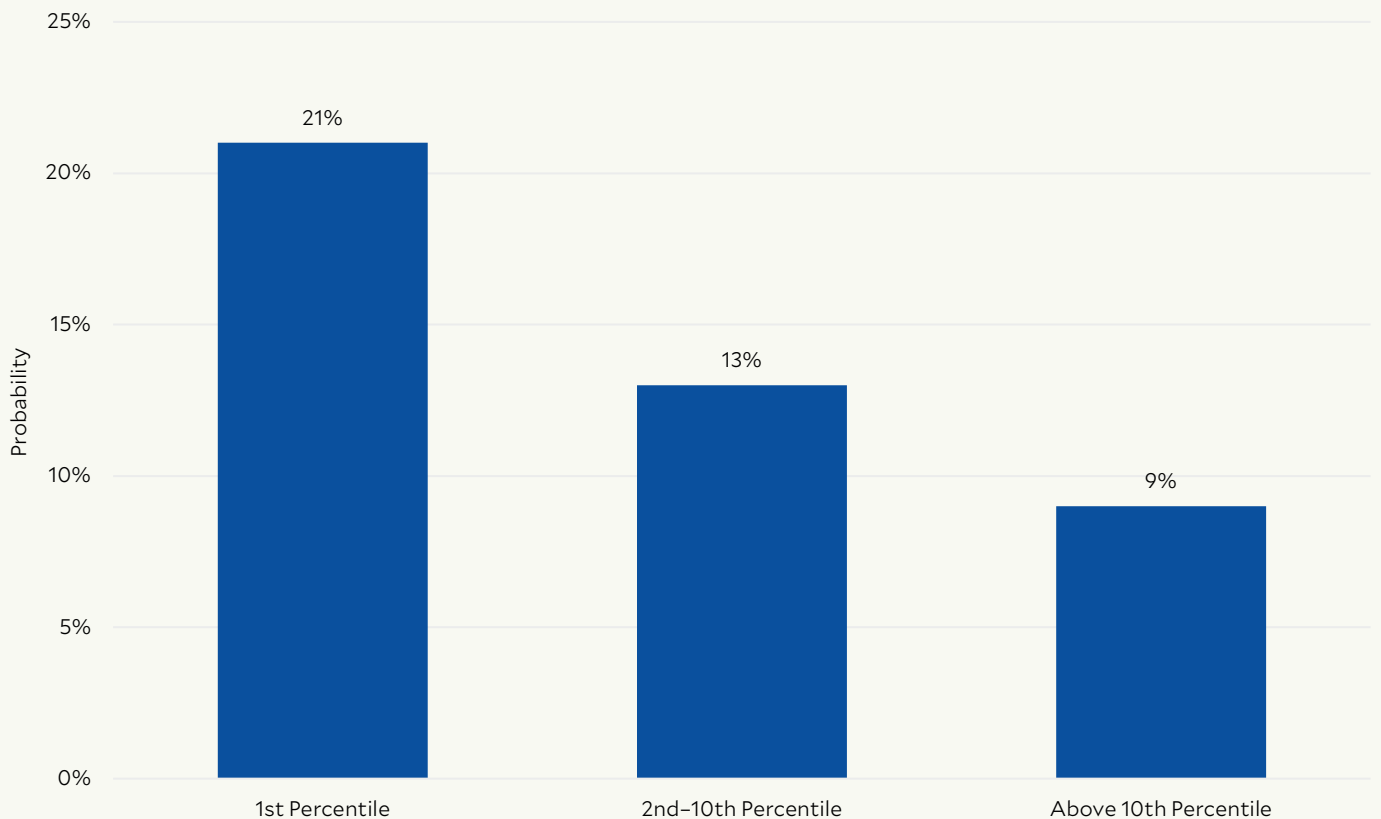
### 3 Newcomer students who had lower levels of oral English proficiency were more likely to enroll at Las Americas than students with higher levels of oral English proficiency.

When newcomer students arrived in HISD, they took an oral English proficiency test to assess their language skills.<sup>3</sup> As Figure 4 shows, newcomer students' likelihood of enrolling at Las Americas instead of other schools in HISD varied by their level of oral English proficiency. Net of background characteristics, 21% of students who scored in the 1st percentile of the oral English proficiency test (the lowest scorers) enrolled at Las Americas versus other HISD schools. In contrast, students who had higher test scores were less likely to enroll at Las Americas: 13% of students who scored within the 2nd-10th percentiles enrolled at Las Americas versus other HISD schools, while 9% of

students who scored above the 10th percentile enrolled at Las Americas versus other HISD schools.

<sup>3</sup> During the study period, the oral English proficiency exam HISD used was the IDEA Proficiency Test (IPT). HISD no longer uses the IPT to assess oral English proficiency.

**FIGURE 4** Probability of Las Americas Enrollment by Oral English Proficiency



## 4 Newcomer students who lived closer to Las Americas were more likely to enroll at the school than students who lived farther away.

Newcomer students who lived closer to Las Americas were more likely to enroll at the school. See Figure 5 for a graphical illustration. The map on the left shows the total number of newcomer middle school students who were eligible to enroll at Las Americas between the 2007–2008 and 2018–2019 school years by Census tract.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the map on the right shows the total number of Las Americas enrollees within the same time span by Census tract. Tracts highlighted dark blue had more eligible newcomer students or Las Americas enrollees, whereas tracts highlighted light blue had fewer eligible newcomer students or Las Americas enrollees. The gray tracts are areas where the data were suppressed because too few newcomers or Las Americas students lived in the tract. The red dot marks Las Americas’s old campus location (before fall

2006), while the green dot marks the school’s current location (since fall 2006).

The map on the left shows that newcomer students lived all over HISD’s boundaries. There were, of course, areas like Southwest Houston—where Las Americas is located—with higher concentrations of newcomers. The map on the right shows that while newcomer students lived throughout HISD, Las Americas enrollees tended to come from neighborhoods near the school. Distance was a strong predictor of whether a newcomer student chose to enroll at Las Americas: students who lived more than a 20-minute drive away had a very low likelihood of enrollment.<sup>5</sup>

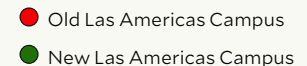
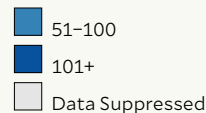
4 To enroll at Las Americas, students had to be classified as a newcomer and be in grades 6–8 (all years) or in grades 4–5 (2012–2013 and after).

5 These results are available from the authors upon request.

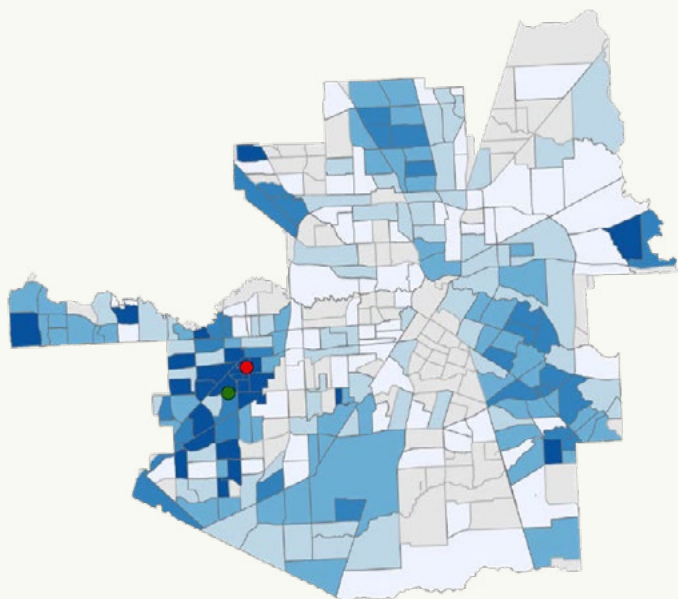
**FIGURE 5 Maps of Eligible Newcomer Students and Las Americas Middle School Enrollees**

### Legend

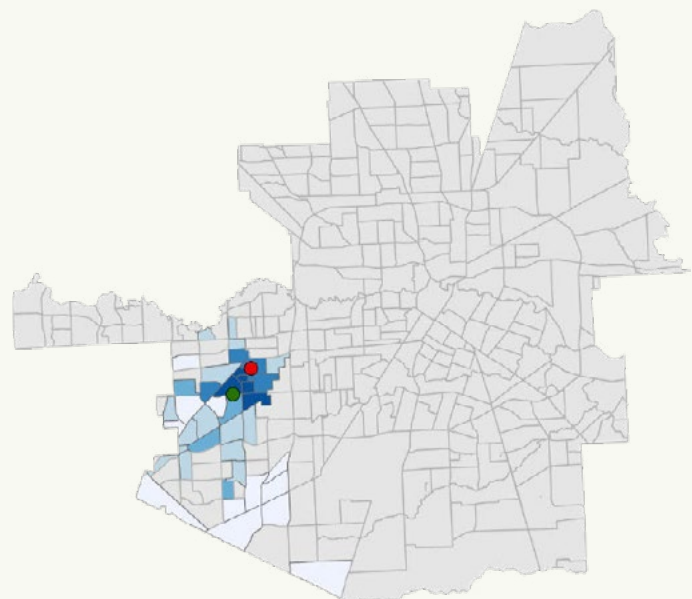
Total Las Americas Middle School Enrollees & Comparison Newcomer Students, 2007–2008 to 2018–2019



### Eligible Newcomer Students



### Las Americas Middle School Enrollees

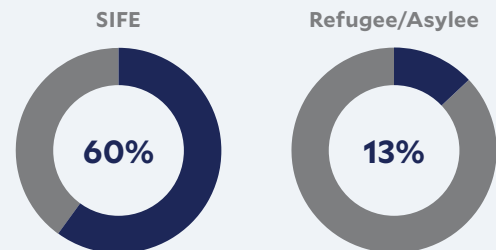




## Spotlight on students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) and refugee/asylee status

**B**ecause data on SIFE and refugee/asylee status, two non-mutually exclusive statuses, were only available starting in the 2014-2015 school year, these characteristics were not used to predict Las Americas enrollment in the main analyses. However, when the analyses were limited to the 2014-2015 school year and after, SIFE and refugee/asylee status *did* predict enrollment at Las Americas. **In fact, SIFE status was the strongest predictor of Las Americas enrollment.**

- **Three-fifths of Las Americas students experienced interrupted formal education in their home countries, and 13% were refugees or asylees.**
- **SIFE students were 39 percentage points more likely to enroll at Las Americas than other eligible newcomer students, while refugee/asylee students were 6 percentage points more likely to enroll.**
- **In HISD, most SIFE students came from Honduras (35%), El Salvador (30%), or Guatemala (13%), while most refugee/asylees came from Afghanistan (16%), Congo (14%), and Iraq (13%).**



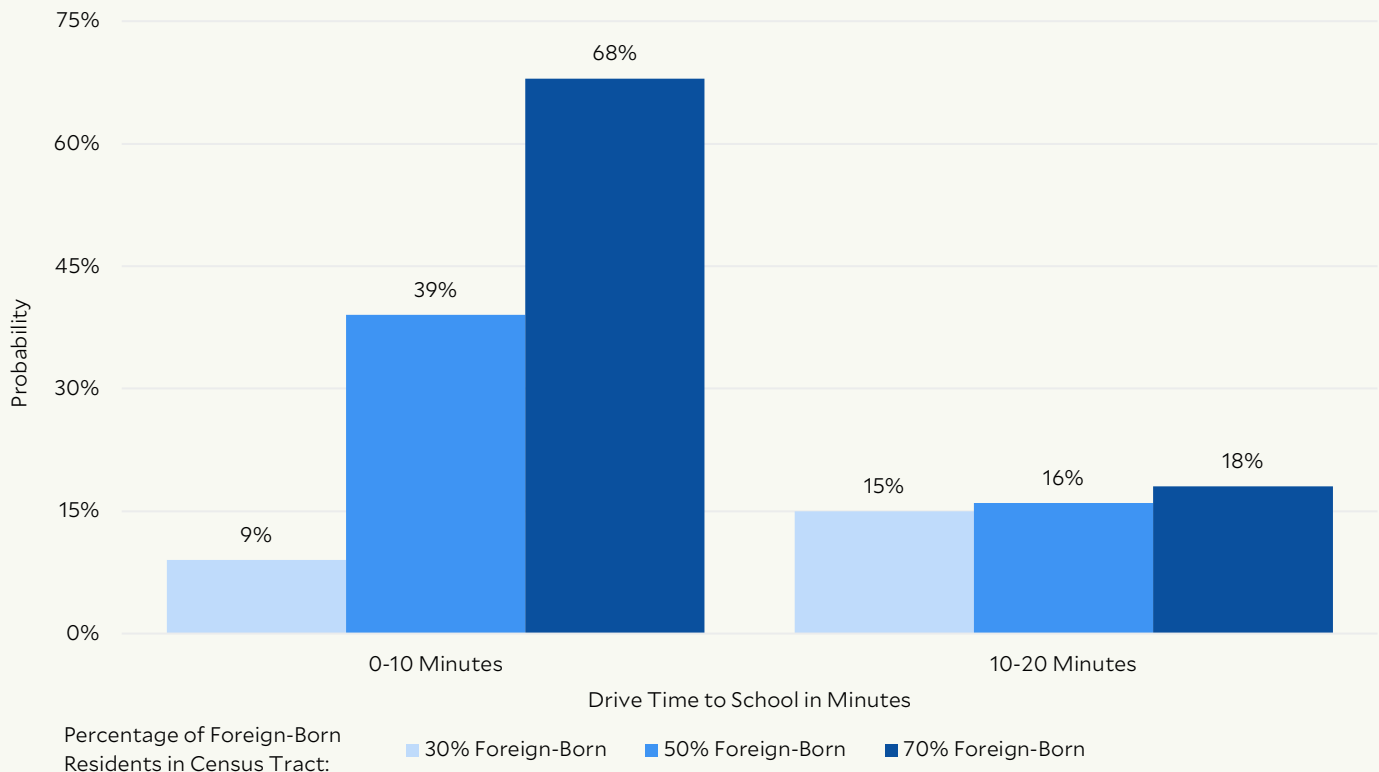
## 5 Newcomer students who lived closer to the school and who lived in neighborhoods with more immigrants were most likely to enroll.

Las Americas administrators' recruitment strategies involved reaching out to newcomer students and families who lived close to the school and reaching out to people who lived in neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrants.

Figure 6 illustrates that newcomer students who lived in neighborhoods closer to Las Americas and in Census tracts with higher shares of foreign-born residents were more likely to enroll than students who lived in neighborhoods closer to the school with lower shares of foreign-born residents, as well as students who lived in neighborhoods farther from the school with higher shares of immigrants.

FIGURE 6

### Probability of Las Americas Enrollment by Drive Time to the School and Percentage of Foreign-Born Residents in Census Tract





## 6 The grade level expansion and the school busing policy both increased Las Americas enrollment.

At the beginning of the 2012–2013 school year, Las Americas opened its doors to fourth- and fifth-grade students. Prior to that year, only students in grades 6–8 were allowed to enroll. The research team found that this grade level expansion had a **5.8 percentage point impact** on Las Americas enrollment rates among students who lived near the school and who had lower oral English proficiency test scores.<sup>6</sup>

Starting in the 2015–2016 school year, Las Americas began providing school bus transportation to students. Prior to that year, if students chose to enroll, then they had to provide their own transportation to the school.

Figure 7 shows how the school busing policy affected enrollment. The map on the left shows the annual average number of eligible newcomer students by Census

tract who enrolled at Las Americas *before* the school busing policy. In contrast, the map on the right shows the annual average number of Las Americas enrollees *after* the school busing policy. Census tracts highlighted dark blue indicate that more newcomer students enrolled at Las Americas, whereas tracts highlighted light blue indicate that fewer newcomer students enrolled at Las Americas. The gray tracts are areas where the data were suppressed because too few newcomer students enrolled at Las Americas.

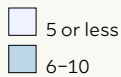
The darkest blue tract on the left map is where Las Americas is currently located. The two maps show how the school busing policy increased Las Americas enrollment from neighborhoods right by the school to neighborhoods slightly farther away. However, newcomer students who lived outside Southwest Houston were still unlikely to enroll even after the busing policy was implemented.

<sup>6</sup> These results are available from the authors upon request.

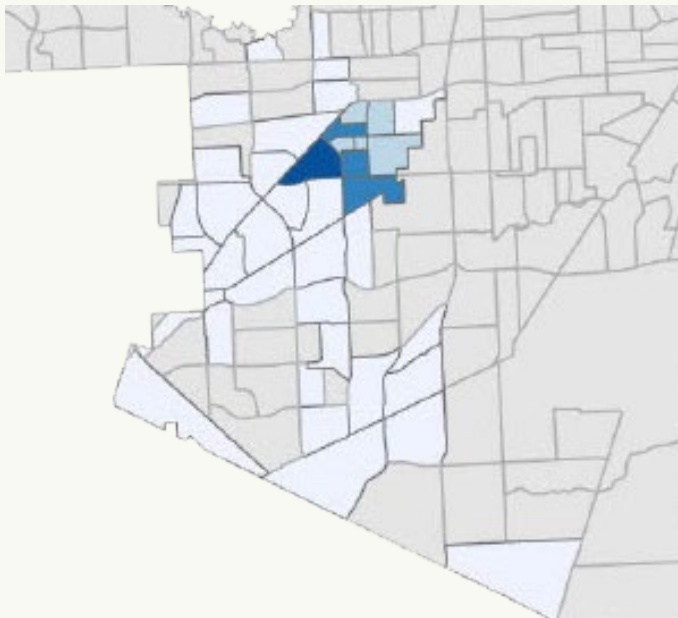
**FIGURE 7** Maps of Las Americas Enrollment Pre- and Post-School Busing Policy

### Legend

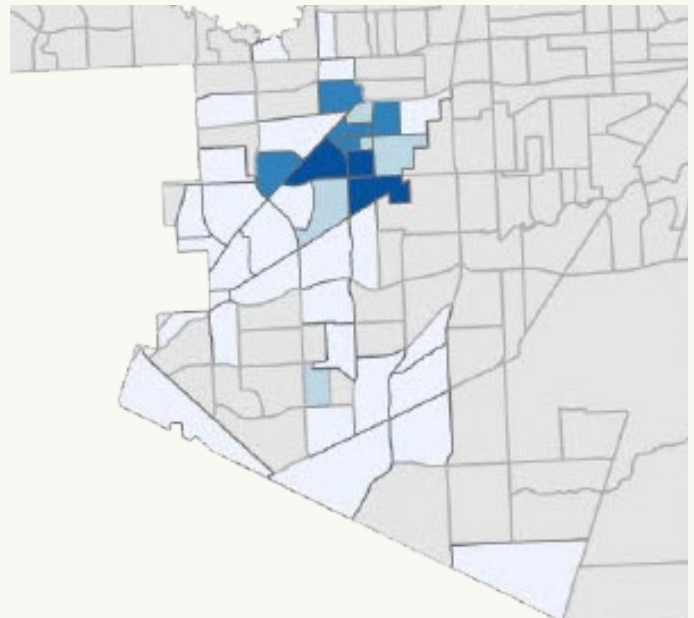
Annual Average Number of Las Americas Enrollees by Census Tract



**Pre-School Busing Policy**  
2007–2008 to 2014–2015



**Post-School Busing Policy**  
2015–2016 to 2018–2019



# Conclusion

## Summary and Discussion

This research brief found that socioeconomic and demographic characteristics predicted Las Americas Middle School enrollment. Specifically, newcomer students who were economically disadvantaged were more likely to enroll at the school than non-economically disadvantaged students. Students from sub-Saharan Africa and Central America were more likely to enroll at Las Americas than students from other parts of the world. The analyses also showed that academic performance predicted enrollment: students with lower oral English proficiency test scores were more likely to enroll than students with higher test scores. This aligns with the former principal's practice of admitting students with the greatest need (e.g., students with a third-grade literacy level and below). The results found that distance affected Las Americas Middle School choice. The maps in Figure 5 show that Las Americas enrollees tended to live in nearby Census tracts.

The analyses provided suggestive evidence that Las Americas's outreach and recruitment strategies might be associated with enrollment. Specifically, students who lived closer to the school and who lived in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of foreign-born residents had greater likelihoods of enrollment. In addition, two policies the school adopted to impact enrollment rates worked. The grade level expansion increased Las Americas school choice by nearly 6 percentage points and the school busing policy increased enrollment in neighborhoods slightly farther away from the school.

Based on these findings, the consistent barrier to Las Americas enrollment was living far from the school. Although the busing policy helped increase enrollment among newcomer students who lived farther away, most students enrolled still lived in Southwest Houston. If the school and district aim to broaden access to newcomer programs to more students regardless of where they live, establishing newcomer programs or services outside Southwest Houston and closer to where other newcomers live may be worth exploring.

## Recommendations

- **Continue to target and recruit eligible newcomer students who live in neighborhoods with high percentages of foreign-born residents, including those who live far from Las Americas.** The study found that students who lived in neighborhoods with higher shares of immigrant residents *and* who lived closer to the school were most likely to enroll. If the school and district want to expand access to Las Americas to newcomer students living farther away, they must reach out to students and families outside Southwest Houston. They should also inform people of the school busing policy so they know they do not need to provide their own transportation to the school.

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The Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC aims to improve the connection between education research and decision making for the purpose of equalizing outcomes by race, ethnicity, economic status, and other factors associated with inequitable educational opportunities.



RICE UNIVERSITY

Kinder Institute for Urban Research

6100 Main Street MS-208 • Houston, TX 77005  
713-348-4132 • [kinder@rice.edu](mailto:kinder@rice.edu)  
[kinder.rice.edu](http://kinder.rice.edu)